The meeting of the Primates of the Anglican Communion took place in Canterbury in January, There are 38 of them - the leaders or senior bishops of the provinces of the Anglican Communion.

You will have seen the Communique and the 'consequences' which that meeting decided to impose on The Episcopal Church of the United States. The primary question in your minds will be this, 'And will the same consequences or sanctions apply to us if we approve the proposals for canonical change in respect of marriage in 2016 and 2017?'

The meeting discussed many issues. The Primates agreed to 'walk together' - although some almost immediately - and to our great regret - walked away. The Primates set up a Task Group:

*“to maintain conversation among ourselves with the intention of restoration of relationship, the rebuilding of mutual trust, healing the legacy of hurt, recognising the extent of our commonality and exploring our deep differences, ensuring they are held between us in the love and grace of Christ.”*

In respect of The Episcopal Church of the United States. and its decision to change its Canons to allow Same Sex Marriage, this is what they said:

*“It is our unanimous desire to walk together. However given the seriousness of these matters we formally acknowledge this distance by requiring that for a period of three years The Episcopal Church no longer represent us on ecumenical and interfaith bodies, should not be appointed or elected to an internal standing committee and that while participating in the internal bodies of the Anglican Communion, they will not take part in decision making on any issues pertaining to doctrine or polity.*

Two weeks ago, I went to London and met with Archbishop Justin specifically to ask the question, 'Will this also apply to us if we complete the process of Canonical change in 2017?' The answer is that it will. Most directly, I will be removed from the role of Anglican Co-Chair of the International Anglican-Reformed Dialogue. But other effects are limited. Our bishops will be present and fully involved in the Lambeth Conference planned for 2020. We shall continue to be actively involved in our network of Diocesan Companionships and in the Anglican Networks.

Let me try try and explain to you what has happened and what has changed.

The Anglican Communion does not have a central authority, The Provinces - of which our own SEC is one - are autonomous. But clearly we owe a duty and respect to other Provinces, We sometimes say 'autonomous and interdependent'. That delicate balance becomes stressed when Provinces which live in very different contexts address the changing context in which they live in very different ways, The Global North is experiencing massive social change in respect of human sexuality - not that the church simply follows that. The Global South - and in particular Sub-Saharan Africa - remains deeply conservative and is under pressure from the Islamisation of Africa. The legacy of colonialism makes measured and respectful dialogue very difficult. Different understandings of collegiality and leadership confuse expectations about how issues will be addressed.

The unanswered question is, 'Who oversees the limits of Anglican diversity and what happens when those limits are crossed?'

What has changed is that the Primates Meeting has taken that role to itself. The conclusion is that the American Church has put its autonomy ahead of catholicity - or, to put it more crudely, it has done what it wanted to do regardless of the feelings of others. So it must suffer the consequences outlined.

It was a very difficult meeting - not so much a carefully-facilitated exploration of complex issues as a decision driven by a desire to stave off fracture, walk-out and boycott.

The origins of the Primates Meeting lie in the call of Archbishop Coggan for 'leisurely thought, prayer and deep consultation'. The justification for moving beyond that consultative role lie in the application of a Resolution of Lambeth 1988 - 'offering guidance on doctrinal, moral and pastoral matters'.

I believe that the Primates Meeting has acted beyond its powers. That is not an issue about Human Sexuality but about Anglican polity and governance. Some of us now - but all of us eventually - will have to address issues of human sexuality. To adopt a sanctions-based approach to the internal discipline of the Anglican Communion - when we have already rejected the Anglican Covenant - seems to me to be a real pity.

So what does this mean for us now?

First - the supreme authority of our church is the General Synod of the Scottish Episcopal Church. The proposals for canonical change which we shall debate this year come before us by the will of our General Synod. That does not change, What does change is that each of us now understands what the impact of any change will be on the Communion and our place within it. We should be respectfully mindful of that.

Second - it is tempting to be upset and angry about all this. But the standard of response was set for me by my friend the Presiding Bishop from America - to paraphrase, 'I am the child of slaves ... We were diminished and excluded .... this brings that back ... but I love Jesus and I love the church'. He said subsequently, 'they could have voted us off the island'. I understand him to be saying, 'this hurts at the deepest level. But it could be worse. It will not change what we do. And maybe it is a price worth paying for the ultimate healing of the Communion.' It is a graciousness which challenges us.

Third - our bishops have been focused on the unity of our church and believe that we have been modelling how these difficult issues can be dealt with. The votes we take will express a decision but, as every other church discovers, the need to maintain unity is paramount. There are measures coming before our Synod which are intended to maintain a place of respect and acceptance for our own diversity.

Fourth - and this applies particularly to me - the Anglican Communion needs a process for measured and respectful conversation. It already has one. It is called Continuing Indaba and I am privileged to be the Convenor of the Reference Group. Sadly it has been damaged by unfair attack and misinformation, But it stands for the reality that the Communion is dispersed and relational rather than centralised and authoritarian.

I apologise for the time I have taken. But these are issues both complex and painful. It is an unhappy and still unfolding story. I believe that in God's providence we are rather more at the end of the beginning than at the beginning of the end.